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ABSTRACT

A theory of interpersonal communication called "the coordinated management of meaning" (CMM) involves three propositions. (1) The fundamental unit of communication is the "speech act," something that the speaker does to the listener by making that particular message at that time. (2) The structure of communication is episodic, consisting of a sequence of speech acts with a beginning, end, and internal structure. (3) Persons and cultures differ in terms of their repertoire of episodes; in the extreme form, cultural differences can make persons incomprehensible to each other. The implications of CMM involve personal transition, cross-group communication, episodic structure, and group structure. The research projects that have developed from the theory show that CMM is empirically relevant. (JP)

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COORDINATION AND ENACTMENT OF CONVERSATIONAL EPISODES: A PERSPECTIVE ON INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

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For several years now, I have been developing a theory of interpersonal communication under the rubric "the coordinated management of meaning." Various aspects of the theory have been described for undergraduates (Pearce, 1976a) and colleagues (Pearce, 1975; 1976b; Pearce and Conklin, 1977), but none of these fully satisfies me, for three reasons. First, all are narrowly focused on some aspect of the theory, leaving important questions of breadth and depth unanswered if not unasked. Second, none has given a systematic treatment to the formal properties of the theory. Third, none has more than hinted at the implications which I believe inhere to the theory. Without having followed all of the issues to a conclusion, I believe that the theory of CMM provides a basis from which the direction of theoretical integration and profitable research throughout the social sciences can be discerned.

The purpose of this paper is to extend the argument for CMM by restating its basic assumptions for those not already familiar with them; by summarizing the answers which these assumptions imply for fundamental questions of theory-building; by stating in propositional form some of the methodological and substantive aspects of the theory; and by describing briefly research projects planned or in progress which are derived from the theory.

It is the last of these which satisfies me the most. During the last three years, I have repeatedly argued with students and colleagues about the legitimacy of CMM, with very mixed success. In many respects, CMM is a direct denial of the assumptions of the dominant paradigm in the social sciences, and I found considerable pleasure sniping at the soft spots in other theories and stampeding the sacred cows around seminar rooms. But the burden of proof assumed by an attempt to construct theory is much heavier and requires a less cavalier procedure than is demanded by the iconoclast's burden of refutation. I have had to argue that the assumptions of CMM are plausible and that the theoretic content is consistent with them, and even if I carried each of these issues, the result was at best a draw. And having once again to respond to the query "what's an episode?" when the answer requires discovering something in the asker's experience to identify with the concept is a weariness to the spirit.

The bulk of the problem that I've had stems from the nature of my disavowal of the dominant paradigm. According to Kuhn's (1970) idealized description, "normal science" proceeds until the number of anomalies reaches some level which is deemed intolerable. Someone then revises the theory to account for the anomalies and a "scientific revolution" (or "evolution" or "migration" -- see Rossiter, 1976) occurs. The social sciences, however, are in a position to utilize the procedure of <u>verstehen</u> (roughly "empathic understanding") in a way which would not make sense for a natural scientist. Precisely because a social scientist is both a participant in and an observer of his subject-

matter, he can make informed decisions about theory on the basis of his experience. Although normal science under the dominant paradigm is producing an increasing number of anomalies (see Brewer, 1975), my decision to develop an alternative was based on the absence of "fit" between the theoretical basis of social science and my own experience as a public speaker, counselor and executive. Regardless of the merits of this procedure, the effect has been to limit my ability to substantiate the conceptual utility of the CMM theory to descriptions of my own or other persons' experiences.

All of which is to say that the theory was at the "literary" and "academic" levels of development and its defense rested on my forensic and descriptive abilities. Science -- in the small sense of being based on controlled observation -- is easier, and I'm delighted to be at the point where the theory can be assessed by its heuristic and predictive value in research.

ASSUMPTIONS

The development of any theory must answer -- explicitly or implicitly -- a number of questions. These include: 1) What is the unit of analysis for observation and theorizing? Is the focus molar or molecular? Nomothetic or ideographic? 2) What is the nature of the subject-matter? Is it an irreducible entity subject to the action of external forces as Newton thought of matter and Woelful of attitudes? Is it organized into systems? Is it constructed by persons? 3) What is the underlying concept of human nature? Is it active or passive? Purposeful or reactive? 4) What is the structure of explanation involved in the theory? Is it probablistic, logical, causal or telic? CMM theory uses the phrase "the coordinated management of meaning" both as a description of communication and as an ancestral term the explication of which presents the major assumptions of the theory. The characteristics of CMM can be described by showing how an explication of its ancestral term answers these questions. The discussion below is summarized by Figure 1.

CMM conceptualizes communication as consisting of a sequence of messages, produced alternatively by two or more persons, such that the sequence is (in coherent communication, at least) interpretable to the participants. To produce such a sequence requires coordination, even if the sequence itself expresses disagreement or is used as an arena for conflict. Communicators achieve coordination by making independent choices which have interdependent effects. Perhaps the best analysis of coordination is that by Lewis (1969), who suggested that coordination requires rules (he called them "conventions") which enable persons to develop expectations about how others will act. In a case of pure coordination, each person is able to choose either X or Y; there is no preferance for X or Y; except that it is preferred that both persons make the same choice.

A focus on coordination requires the unit of analysis to include interacting dyads (or triads, etc.) who produce temporal sequences of messages. A reductionistic procedure which is either monadic or non-processual simply would not pick up coordination phenomena. Coordination also requires a concept of human nature as socially integrated and purposeful. Even if persons are "caused" to "react" in some areas of experience, this ancestral term limits CMM to areas of choice between available options. The explanatory structure of the theory must account for the ability of dyads (etc.) to achieve coordination rather than simply identifying causes for effects. This suggests a "generative" theory which focuses on human power rather than a covering-law theory which subsumes particular instances under general principles (see Harré and Madden, 1975).

This emphasis on choice naturally leads to the ancestral term of management. Reflecting Kelley's (1955) optimism that man is the prisoner neither of his history nor his heredity, CMM focuses on those processee by which the rules guiding coordination are formed and those processes by which persons learn and adopt those rules. This assumption also implies that the theory must be "mentalistic" to the extent that it accounts for subjects' interpretive procedures. The theorist is two steps from messages themselves: he may observe messages, but he must also account for the communicators account for those messages (the implications of this structure are discussed at some length in Pearce, 1977). "Management" also implies the necessity for a concept of human nature as active and for the use of telic explanation.

That communication depends on meanings is virtually axiomatic in the discipline, but the concept of meaning remains amorphous. CMM stipulates that messages are the tokens of meanings, and that interpersonally produced sequences of messages are the basic unit of action. It follows that there must be meanings involved in communication which span messages, providing the interpretative frame around sequences of messages such that participants know what to expect and what to do next. This concept of meaning defines the unit of analysis as the actor's interpretations, which implies that the subject-matter is the process and products of individual and social construing processes. It follows, if not obviously, that the structure of explanation must be multileveled: individual messages have meanings, but these are contextualized by and interpreted in the light of "higher level" meanings which apply to sequences of messages.

These assumptions produce a theory which posits the existence of consensually shared rules which enable persons to develop expectations about each other's choices. These expectations make possible coordination by facilitating conjoint selection of meanings, where those meanings pertain both to particular messages and sequences of messages. Ignoring for a minute the empirical question of the existence and function of rules, it is possible to demonstrate that the theory meets the formal requirements of

generality and necessity (Cushman and Pearce, 1977).

The generality of the theory depends on two factors: 1) the extent to which a particular set of rules are adopted (e.g., are agreed as being relevant, see Ganz, 1971) by a group and 2) the task or purpose of the individuals. For example, it is possible for my friends and me to be bilingual. But if I want to be understood (task) when talking to most of them, I would have to use English because as a matter of history we have not adopted the rules of any second language.

The necessity of a rules-based theory is that of practical force. Rules describe the agreements about patterns of behavior shared by members of a group. If a person wishes to perform a task which involves coordinated behavior with other persons, his own actions are necessary to the extent that what he does entails the other person's behavior and to the extent that other persons' behavior are covered by rules currently adopted by the group. Practical force can be explained by using the structure of a practical syllogism (von Wright, 1971): A wants B;

A believes that he must do X if B is to occur;

∴ A sets himself to do X.

In this explanation, B is a task or goal which requires coordinated behavior with other people, and A's belief that X is a condition for the occurrance of B is based on his knowledge of the rules adopted by those other people.

PROPOSITIONS

The preceeding paragraphs sketch the general form of the theory of CMM, obviously summarizing only the conclusions of many lines of thought. This section hangs some meat on those bare bones by stating in propositional form some of the substantive elements of the theory.

1. <u>The fundamental unit of communication is the "speech act."</u>

This and the other propositions assume a hierarchical model of communication such as is shown in Figure 2 and discussed in greater detail by Pearce and Conklin (1977). The model represents the transformations which a particular message goes through at various levels of abstraction when a person makes meaning of it. The message itself is a part of the flux of experience: raw sensory data. It is "decoded" into propositions and sentences, then interpreted as a "speech act" -- something that the speaker does to the listener by making that particular message at that time. Speech acts consist of "relational meanings" (Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson, 1967), the "significance" rather than "signification" of a message (Morris, 1964) and involve a lexicon including "obeys," "compliments," "insults," etc. The concept was developed most explicitly by Austin (1962) and Searle (1969). Searle (1967) noted that speech acts are the smallest <u>interpersonal</u>

act and argued that they are basic to understanding conversation, but recent discussion of the topic unfortunately seems to have gone away from this concept toward a monadic concept of a single person interacting with a disembodied language (cf. Cole and Morgan, 1975).

Searle (1969) argued that speech acts occur only when persons agree that they have, and that these agreements are guided by constitutive rules. A touchdown, for example, occurs only when certain conditions obtain (goal line, offensive team, time remaining, etc.) that a group has agreed upon but which have no necessary relationship to "touchdown." Similarly, a given message, such as "Hi, you dirty old SOB," can constitute the speech act of "insult," "friendly greeting," "endearment," etc., depending on the rules which guide behavior.

2. The structure of communication is episodic.

This proposition is really just the elaboration of the assumption that communication is a coordination activity. If conversations consist of sequences of messages; if these messages comprise some pattern interpretable to the participants which guides their understanding and subsequent performance; if messages become communicative when they are interpreted as speech acts, and if it is unreasonable to assume that these sequences are continued indefinition, then it follows that there exist bounded patterns of speech acts. Following Harré and Secord (1973), CMM labels these "episodes" and defines them as punctuated units of meaning consisting of a sequence of speech acts with a beginning and an end and an internal structure.

Consider the speech act "apologize." To achieve a coordinated conversation in which "apologize" can occur requires, in addition to an agreement about the constitutive rules, an agreement about what speech acts legitimately come before and what come after it. To successfully bring off an episode in which apology occurs, the person must know the group-shared rules for episodic patterns. Responding to an apology also requires a knowledge of the legitimate sequential structure of speech acts. Consider:

A	B
"complain"	
	"apologize"
"accept" (or "dismiss")	

This has, for me at least, a sense of closure: it fits as a pattern and A and B are ready to move on. But consider:

A	B
"complain"	
	"apologize"
"criticize"	
	"insist apologize"
"criticize"	
	"retract apologize"

Here the episode was not brought off because the rules legitimate that "apology" be accepted (in my culture the rules stress the importance for the offended person to help the apologizer save face by minimizing the severity of the offense).

3. Persons and cultures differ in terms of their repertoire of episodes.

As a function of social learning and the demands of necessity, individuals and groups develop different sets of episodes. These repertoires consist of the perceived social environment and heavily influence the "personality" (Sullivan, 1953) and facilitate some forms of social interaction while precluding others. In its extreme form, cultural differences can make persons incomprehensible to each other. Benedict (1946) describes how Americans perceived the Japanese soldiers during World War II who refused to surrender as "fanatics," those who did not give medical assistance to badly wounded American POW's as "brutal," and simply could not understand suicide except as shameful. The episodes structured by the Japanese were very different and reinterpreted each of these. In not so extreme forms, episodic differences constitute coordination problems for spouses, employees, etc. These differences may be socially significant. Some literature suggests that the best single predictor of poverty is whether the person's parents were in poverty. The reason seems to be cultural; specifically, the episodes of work, savings, investment are defined in a way which makes them inaccessible, and this makes poverty more likely. If this is so, the solution to poverty is directed cultural change rather than economics.

The most interesting difference in repertoire of episodes involves archetypes. Archetypes are those logical operations or underlying metaphors which provide the structure within episodes. Let me present this argument by analogy. Let numbers represent speech acts. A conversation may be modeled as a series of numbers alternately generated by each person (e.g., 2; 4; 6; 8). If the participant's perceive a pattern, they can continue confidently. If they cannot, their conversation is incoherent. Their task is to discover a pattern that they both know and can handle. The pattern itself constitutes the episode (e.g., add two). The archetype is the logical/mathematical operation on which the episode is based (e.g., addition). Consider now a conversation between two persons from different cultures, one of whom has the archetype "multiply" while the other has the archetype "square." Their conversation might go like this:

Time	A	B	Comment
1:	2		this is an invitation. Now it's up to B.
2:		4	B thinks $2^2=4$. This is a good next step.
			A thinks 2 x 2=4. This is a good response, we understand each other. Now my next response should be 4 x 2 =8.

Time	A	B	Comment
3:	8		A thinks "we are humming now!"
			B thinks "what?" Surely A meant $4^2 = 16$. It was a slip. I'll ignore it and go on. My next is $16^2 = 352$.
4:		352	A thinks "which of the 7 kinds of fool is he? This is insulting!"
			B thinks "I was very considerate."
			A thinks: "I can play that game too. I'll say 1,000,000!"
5:	1,000,000		B thinks "which of the 7 kinds of fool is he? This is insulting!"

4. Aside from technical problems, there are three types of communication problems. These may be briefly described. First, persons may differ in their identification of speech acts. This depends on the similarity of their constitutive rules. Second, persons may differ in the way they perceived patterns of speech acts in episodes. Third, persons may be unable to coordinate selection of episodes.

IMPLICATIONS

This theory has considerable heuristic value. Some conceptual implications have already been cited, and this section describes several lines of research growing from the theory.

Personal transition.

It is reasonable to assume that normal adults achieve a repertoire of episodes which contain some optimal mix of order and novelty. However, traumatic events frequently occur which disrupt this repertoire of episodes. Despite the nature of the event, retirement, bereavement, religious conversion, incarceration, etc., the effects are the same: a person experiences and most cope with a personal transition. Transitions occur when any combination of three things happen: the availability of others to coenact episodes is changed (e.g., bereavement, divorce); the perceived legitimacy of others to coenact episodes is changed (e.g., a woman's lover takes vows as a priest; a supposed friend is discovered to be a traitor); or a person's concept of self changes in such a way as to disqualify him from his normal repertoire of episodes (e.g., religious conversion; major injury to an athlete; disgrace to a political figure). There is ample evidence that transitions have serious effects on individuals and groups, but studies of coping strategies have focused almost entirely on intrapersonal responses. CMM theory suggests two interpersonal coping strategies. First, a person may continue to enact the same episodes but substitute other persons for the now disqualified or unavailable partners. This requires recruiting and training new partners. Second, a person may learn and begin to enact a new set of episodes.

Several studies of transition are presently being designed. One will deal with persons who are retiring from life-long careers; another with wives of naval officers who are periodically absent from the family while on sea duty; and another with new college students leaving home for the first time. The study of navy wives is particularly interesting because of the periodic nature of the transition. Initially, it appears that any coping strategy that is effective for adjustment to one of the periodic conditions -- husband home/husband away -- is counterproductive for the other condition. The general research procedure is this: We will obtain a list of episodes characteristic of the women's behavior when their husbands are away and when they are home from a sample of wives who have experienced at least two cycles of sea-duty and return. Using a procedure similar to that described by Forgas (1976), we will have these women rate frequently nominated episodes for each condition on a series of bipolar adjectival scales. Factor analysis will describe the dimensionality of their perceived social reality for the husband-home, husband-away conditions. This will provide the basis for structured interviews of the women in which they will be asked to describe the coping strategies they use for these periodic transitions. These coping strategies will be correlated with several independent measures of successful adjustment.

Cross-group communication.

CMM theory assumes that some of the force which holds groups together are rules which facilitate the achievement of objectives within the group but which impede cross-group interaction. Whether these barriers to extra-group communication are consciously produced, they are effective, and some groups certainly make a virtue of them. One study assesses some of the rules pertaining to communication which differentiate feminists from more traditional women. Jackson's (1975) procedures, which generate scores for the intensity and crystalization of the evaluation of particular behaviors within a group, is being used to measure the differences between various groups of women as they evaluate 8 excerpts of conversation in which some gender-specific reference is made. Subjects also identify the speech act performed by each excerpt by selecting from a series of descriptors representing several dimensions of perceived interpersonal relationships (Wish, Deutsch and Kaplan, 1976).

Episodic structure.

For the purposes of control, we have constructed an artificial language in which there is no sentential grammar and no propositions. The lexicon consists of a list of 35-40 descriptions of speech acts, one to a card. The list includes a range of acts representing affect, intensity, social-task definitions of the relationship, status differentials and interaction management procedures (e.g., "terminate"; "turn-yielding"). Subjects produce dyadic conversations by alternately selecting one of the

speech acts. The obtained sequence represents a conversation at the level of speech acts, defined by the actors. We plan to generate descriptions of episodic structures by computing the stochastic probabilities of particular sequences.

In this study, we are particularly interested in the speech act of self-disclosure. In replications, we will manipulate the task and the situation so as to determine the sequences of speech acts in which self-disclosure is permitted, prohibited or required.

This procedure to self-disclosure and to sequential structure of conversation seems to avoid several problems, among them the confusion of levels of abstraction between the propositional force of utterances and the speech acts. It also has some obvious weaknesses.

Group structure.

Based on CMM theory, groups are best defined by the rules they share rather than conventional descriptors, such as assigned task, roster of members, etc. This approach leads to an empirical description of a group and is able to account for differences in the subjective structure of groups even if the objective structure is the same.

We are studying a series of overlapping groups, consisting of a group of undergraduate interns in a basic psychology class and two discussion groups in that class headed by each of the interns. Using Jackson's (1975) procedure described earlier at four equally spaced instances during the semester, we will be able to detect changes in the rule-structure of the group and to describe groups in terms of the differentiation among the rules for various persons in them. We will associate this information with measures of group performance and satisfaction.

DISCUSSION

The description of these research projects is sufficient to show that CMM is empirically relevant. None of these studies is a critical test of the theory, but if the results are as expected, they will show that the theory is useful. And in the final analysis, utility is the criterion which will determine whether any theory becomes a part of the scientists' bag of tricks or is relegated to a footnote in passing on to another perspective.

Meta-theoretic questions:

Ancestral term:	Unit of analysis	Nature of subject-matter	Concept of human nature	Structure of explanation	Characteristics of theory
COORDINATION:	molar, dyadic temporal sequences		social, active, purposeful	account for ability to coordinate	consensual rules guiding purposeful activity
MANAGEMENT:		"mentalistic"	active, purposeful	telic	purposeful action following the practical syllogism
MEANING:	abstract-ions, inter-pretations	construed by subjects		multi-leveled	hierarchical model of rule-governed meanings

Figure 1: Assumptions and Characteristics of the Theory of the Coordinated Management of Meaning

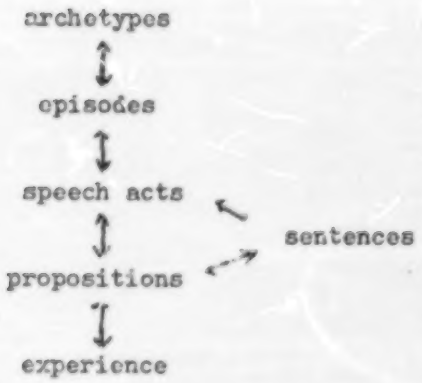

Figure 2: A hierarchical model of communication

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